



MONTANA LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

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DATE: January 24, 2002

TO: HJR1 Interim Committee

FROM: Lorene Thorson

RE: Mentally Ill Offenders in the Corrections System

A group of panelists will provide the HJR 1 Interim Committee with principal facts about the mentally ill in Montana's correction system and provide insight to the policies that have an impact on this population. In addition, the following paragraphs are based on national statistics and are provided to offer a picture of who the mentally ill are in the nation's correction system and how they compare to the general prison population.

STATISTICS ON THE MENTALLY ILL IN STATE PRISONS

The number of mentally ill inmates in prisons and jails has grown while the numbers of mentally ill in psychiatric hospitals has declined. In 1998, the number of incarcerated with a mental illness was four times higher than the number of people in state mental hospitals. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) estimates that 283,800 mentally ill offenders are in prisons and jails across the United States. This 283,800 represents approximately 16 percent of state prisoners and 16 percent of those in local jails. In addition, approximately 16 percent of those on probation indicated a mental condition or stay in a mental hospital.¹ These rates are three times higher than the rate of mental illness in the general population.

Some experts believe the factors that have contributed to the increase of the mentally ill in our prisons include deinstitutionalization, tougher drug laws, cuts in public assistance, tougher civil commitment laws, a lack of affordable housing, and limited availability of community mental health services. Statistics reveal that the mentally ill are more likely than other offenders to have committed a violent offense, have a longer criminal history, and are incarcerated for longer time periods than an inmate committing a similar offense. Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics below refer to the mentally ill in our nation's state prison system (as opposed to jail or federal prison).

- ~~16~~ 60 percent of mentally ill inmates versus 51 percent of other inmates were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of committing an offense
- ~~16~~ 39 percent of mentally ill inmates versus 30 percent of other inmates were unemployed the month before arrest

¹ Ditton, Paula M. *Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, NCJ 174463, July 1999.

- ~~/~~ 20 percent of mentally ill inmates versus 9 percent of other inmates were homeless in the 12 months prior to their arrest
- ~~/~~ 53 percent of mentally ill inmates versus 46 percent of other inmates were in prison for a violent crime (unlike state prisons, the majority of mentally ill offenders in jail or on probation had committed a property or public-order offense)
- ~~/~~ 52 percent of mentally ill inmates versus 42 percent of other inmates had 3 or more prior sentences
- ~~/~~ 10 percent of the mentally ill inmates versus 5.3 percent of other state prison inmates reported eleven or more past offenses
- ~~/~~ Mentally ill inmates serve an average of 15 months longer than other inmates in prison
- ~~/~~ One in every eight inmates received some mental health therapy or counseling in 2000
- ~~/~~ 10 percent of inmates received psychotropic medications in 2000. 21 percent of state inmates in Montana received psychotropic medications in 2000 (the department will address this during the panel discussion)

From an economic perspective, there may be a disincentive to use psychiatric hospitals since the cost per day is much more costly than prison. In Montana, the average daily cost at Montana State Hospital is about \$310 per day compared to the daily cost at Montana State Prison of approximately \$50. Yet, the rate of recidivism among the mentally ill in prison is over 80 percent, with 42 percent having had three to ten prior probation/incarceration sentences and 10 percent having eleven or more prior sentences. When the door revolves that many times, cost per day is not an adequate measure.

There appear to be several doors leading to prison that could be closed to reduce the number of mentally ill entering the correction system: 1) more community services that would be proactive in providing the needed services to at-risk individuals; 2) changes in public policy regarding punitive drug laws and civil commitments; 3) increased affordable housing, public assistance, and employment assistance, and 4) sufficient crisis intervention programs. Once a person with a mental illness is in the system, then appropriate placement, treatment, and access to services and support upon release are necessary to impact recidivism.²

² *For People with Serious Mental Illnesses: Finding the Key to Successful Transition from Jail to the Community.* Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, March 2001.

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